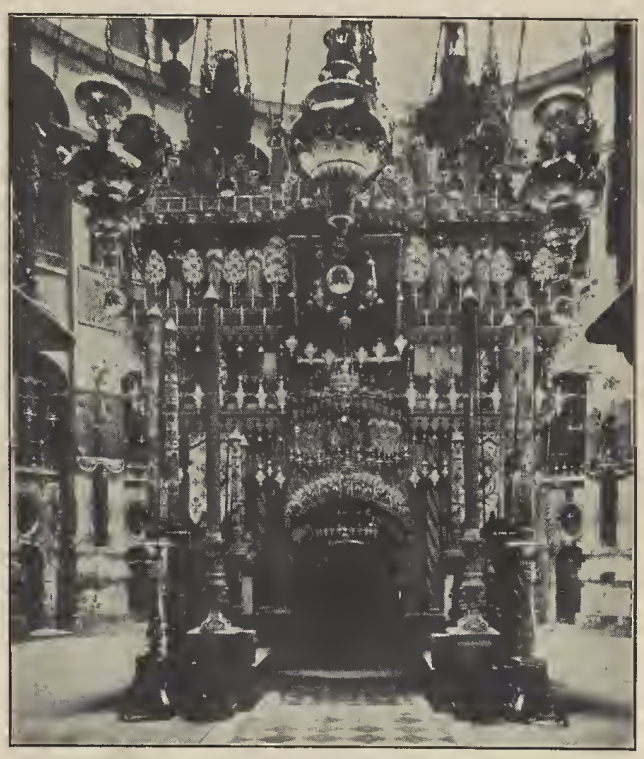
SHARING THE CUSTODIANSHIP OF THE SACRED PLACES

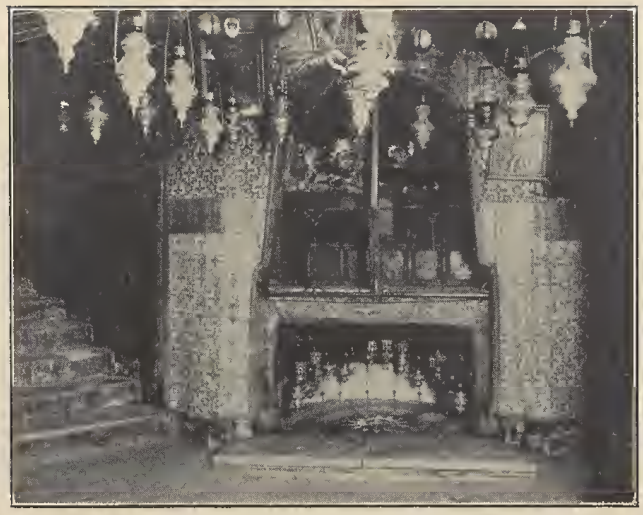
A Statement of Vital Interest to All Who Worship in the Christian Faith



The Holy Sepulchre

TO Christians everywhere no other land is so pregnant with meaning as Palestine, the Holy Land, the scene of the human ministrations of our Saviour. Here are the places associated with the basic facts of our faith; Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ; Nazareth, where He passed His boyhood; the Mount of Olives; Gethsemane; Calvary; and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, perhaps the most sacred spot in all Christendom.

These places have constituted a shrine to which Christian pilgrims and worshippers have repaired to obtain spiritual inspiration through all the Christian centuries. All over the world, Christians have studied the topography of Palestine to find new enthusiasm in



The Place of the Nativity

these localities which saw the earthly activities of Jesus Christ.

This inspiration that comes to Christendom from the places made memorable by Christ's ministry puts Christendom under peculiar obligations to the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem which through the centuries has been the custodian of the Sacred Places in the Holy Land.

For more than 1600 years, since the re-discovery and establishment of the shrines in the days of the Emperor Constantine, these places have been cared for and maintained by the Patriarchs of Jerusalem and the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre which has grown up around them and of which they have been the head. This great Patriarchate, one of the original four of the Orthodox Eastern Church that have continued since the early centuries, is based on the Bishopric of Jerusalem, which dates back to James, the 'Lord's Brother' in the days of the Apostles. It is unquestionably one of the most venerable institutions of Christianity and the work that it has performed throughout the centuries has been of the utmost importance.

Through the stormy times of the Crusades, through the uncertainty of the Dark Ages, through centuries of strife and turmoil in the world, this great institution has been faithful to its sacred trust, maintaining and preserving the shrines. Bravely and devotedly this little band of pious men has exercised its stewardship. Vicissitudes and interruptions have been experienced; their task has been no sinecure. But, regarding it as the sacred trust that it is, the Patriarchate has held these places and maintained them for the benefit of Christianity throughout the world. It is indeed a heavy debt that Christendom owes to this institution.

Nor have its activities been limited to the mere perpetuation of sentiment. The souls of Palestinian Christians have been ministered to for many generations and schools, orphanages, hospitals, a theological seminary and other philanthropic and educational institutions have been maintained.

Through the centuries the Patriarchate has accumulated some holdings of land in Palestine and the surrounding territory. This supplied part of the income necessary to carry on its pious work. By far the greater part, however, came from land holdings in Russia and from the offerings of pilgrims, the majority of whom were Russians. In fact, it is estimated, in an official British report, that, in 1914, 64% of the income was derived from Russian sources.

The war and the Russian Revolution cut off all the income from this source. Simultaneously, additional expenses became necessary in order to dispense war relief. This the Patriarchate did throughout the war, not only to the local population but also to large numbers of refugees without discrimination because of creed.

Even with the utmost economy in administration and with the discontinuance of many of the less pressing activi-

ties, it was necessary to borrow to carry out the program. During the war, money exchange became adverse and borrowing was extremely difficult. The necessary funds were obtained from various sources—banks, individuals and others. The securities given for payment, in the aggregate, constitute a mortgage on the land holdings in Palestine, practically the only remaining source of revenue. If these debts are called and the lands lost, it means that the Patriarchate will be left practically without funds to maintain and care for the most sacred places of the Christian faith.

That means the disappearance of a great Christian church and the loss to evangelical Christianity of the Sacred Places. Nor will the havoc stop there. Because of its peculiarly revered associations, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem is looked upon by Orthodox Christians as the keystone of their faith, and its failure would be followed by grave consequences to the Orthodox church throughout the world.

This would have happened long ago but for the fact that the British Mandatory Government of Palestine has declared a special moratorium. The High Commissioner appointed a British commission of inquiry which investigated the affairs of the Patriarchate and reported measures advisable for the liquidation of the debt. The basic measure was the appointment of a commission of liquidation to administer the affairs of the Patriarchate and, if possible, to liquidate the debt. This Commission was appointed and is now functioning.

The Commission finds it impossible, however, to make much progress toward the liquidation of the debt. Running expenses and interest charges use up practically all of the available income

The Mount of Olives

and the residue left for a sinking fund is so small as to be negligible.

Meanwhile, the time is drawing near when the special moratorium will come to an end. Nor is there any possibility of definitely extending the moratorium. With the end of the period of grace, the creditors will be legally entitled to realize on their securities and the sole important source of income remaining will be snatched away.

In this extremity, for the first time in 1600 years of faithful service to Christianity, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem turns to Christians throughout the world for aid. Bearing a commission from the immemorial custodian of the Sacred Places and the fraternal approval of the Rt. Rev. Rennie MacInnes, Bishop of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem, Archbishop Panteleimon Athanassiades of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem has come to the United States to ask the Christians of this country to join with their brothers throughout the world in bearing their share of the task of maintaining the Sacred Places.

Believing that the situation commands the attention and concern of every Christian, the American Committee on Preservation of the Sacred Places in

the Holy Land has been formed for the purpose of raising America's share of the fund necessary to liquidate this debt and to co-operate with the Patriarchate in the future care of the Sacred Places.

The situation is critical. The choice rests with us and the results depend upon our response. Are we going to stand idly by and see a great Christian institution go down to ruin; are we going to allow the Sacred Places of Christianity to pass from our hands? Or are we going to seize the opportunity to bring about a deeper understanding and closer co-operation among the Christian churches of the world?

With the help of all Christians in this country, we are going to save Christianity in the land of its birth. And the power of our faith will be the measure of our response.

Archbishop Panteleimon Athanassiades, Special Representative of the Patriarch of Jerusalem

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